History of the National Hockey League (First Year 1918, Last Year 1971)

The following is an edited history of the National Hockey League since it began in 1917. Portions of the original story yours truly had typed on a typewriter (which is rarely in use today) at a law firm in California, are left out of the story. Let's begin with events of January, 1918 (calendar year) in the NHL.

Unfortunately, the arena where the Wanderers had played burned down on January 2, 1918, just after the new year began, and the Wanderers became the first NHL franchise to go out of business. The NHL had to finish that first season with only three teams. Fortunately for the Canadiens, they became the first NHL team to win the Stanley Cup, an award handed out to the team that wins all of the necessary playoff games for the championship each year.

The next year, 1918-19, a new team called the Hamilton Tigers, had joined the NHL, along with the Ottawa Senators (this was the original Ottawa franchise that would play in the NHL until 1934; the new Ottawa Senators would be rejoining the NHL in 1992). There were now four teams in the league, but the Stanley Cup Finals, in which Montreal and Seattle (of the Western Hockey League, which was in existence until 1926) had participated, would end up in a draw.

Joe Hall, a member of the Canadiens, had a serious health problem that spread on to other players. Hall died during the Stanley Cup Finals, in which he had been a participant, and the remainder of the series, which was tied at 2-2, was cancelled. It was the only time in NHL history that there was no Stanley Cup winner.

During the 1920's, the National Hockey League began to expand ever so slowly. The Quebec Bulldogs, who held out in the beginning, had now joined the NHL during the upcoming decade. Also entering the NHL during the 1920's were the New York Rangers, the Boston Bruins, the Chicago Black Hawks (which would become Blackhawks as a one-word team in 1988), the Detroit Cougars (before they became the Red Wings), the Montreal Maroons, and the Pittsburgh Pirates--same name as the baseball team. The Bulldogs, however, would soon be gone.

Another American NHL team actually rejoined the league--the New York Americans--after the franchise, which was previously the Hamilton Tigers, protested over lack of money given to the club, had gone on strike. When the strike ended for them, the Hamilton franchise, which not surprisingly, was indeed losing money as were many NHL teams then, had moved to New York, and the Americans would share Madison Square Garden with the Rangers.

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The NHL's first notable stars in the early years were Joe Malone, who was the league's first scoring champion, and Georges Vezina, the Montreal Canadiens' star goaltender whom a trophy would soon be named for him--awarded annually to the NHL's best goalie. The Rangers won their first Stanley Cup in 1928, with 44-year-old Lester Patrick, their own head coach, playing goaltender for one game in

the Stanley Cup playoffs when Lorne Chabot, the Rangers' regular goalie, was injured. Since then, NHL teams have been urged to use at least two goaltenders on their rosters in case one was injured.

In 1929, Georges Vezina was terminally ill and he died, but another of his teammates playing for the Canadiens, Howie Morenz, became to many the Wayne Gretzky of his day. In fact, Montreal proved to be hockey's best team ever, past or present, with 24 Stanley Cups to their credit--23 of them as an NHL team (the Canadiens were actually born in 1909--almost a decade before the NHL even existed). It seemed certain that Morenz would play until he was almost 50, and if he were lucky, would have been the first NHL player to score 50 goals in one season.

But a broken leg in 1937 ended such dreams, and Morenz later died from the leg injury before he was 40 years old.

While the Canadiens were ruling the NHL in the league's early years of existence, some of the other NHL franchises were not so lucky. In the 1930's, during the Great Depression era, three teams folded: Pittsburgh, Ottawa, and the Montreal Maroons. The Pirates had lost money in Pittsburgh steadily since they joined the league in 1924, so they moved to Philadelphia, where they became the Quakers. But the Quakers ended up being one of hockey's most inept teams, losing 15 consecutive games, and won only four the entire season! The Quakers folded in 1931, leaving the NHL with nine teams.

The Senators won six Stanley Cups, most of them during the 1920's, but in 1934, after they lost so much money that they couldn't continue playing in Ottawa, they became the St. Louis Eagles for one year. After that season, the Eagles went bankrupt in 1935 and also put up their "Closed" sign on the door.

The Maroons won a Stanley Cup during the 1920's, too, but since they always shared their playing arena, the Forum, with the Canadiens, it meant that there could be only one Montreal franchise, and the Canadiens had won out over the Maroons, who folded in 1938.

So the NHL operated as a seven-team league (no new franchises would be added until 1967), but when World War II came, the league asked the New York Americans to do something to their franchise--quick!

The Americans did; they became a Brooklyn franchise, but World War II made it too difficult for them to continue as well; by 1942, the NHL had to operate for the next 25 years as a six-team league.

History of the National Hockey League (continued)

In 1940, a goal by New York's Bryan Hextall gave the Rangers a 3-2 victory over Toronto in the Stanley Cup finals. That win by the Rangers gave them the Stanley Cup, their third in franchise history. Sadly, however, it would be their last world championship until 1994.

Finally, there was the NHL, with only six teams in operation since 1942, and after all of the other sports leagues expanded, people were beginning to wonder on when there would be more hockey teams. In 1967, the Centennial year of Canada's birth, that would exactly be the case. Six new teams would join the others, making New York, Toronto, Detroit, Chicago, Boston, and Montreal formally heretofore known as "The Original Six."

The new teams were the California Seals (who later became the Oakland Seals), the Los Angeles Kings, the Minnesota North Stars, the Philadelphia Flyers, the Pittsburgh Penguins, and, finally, the St. Louis Blues, who would appear in three consecutive Stanley Cup finals. As many would have expected to expansion teams, all of them finished with losing records, but because all the new teams formed their own division, it meant four of them would have to make the playoffs.

Those who did were Philadelphia, Los Angeles, St. Louis, and Minnesota. The Flyers beat out the Kings for the newly named Western Division title by one point. The Kings were the only team in the division to score 200 goals, coming up with exactly that many, but it was St. Louis who prevailed in the playoffs, thanks mostly to veterans Red Berenson, Lou Angotti, and goaltenders Glenn Hall and Jacques Plante.

The Blues faced Montreal in the Stanley Cup finals, and they were actually competitive in all four of the games they had played the Canadiens, who were looking for their third title in four years.

Unfortunately for St. Louis, they lost all four games by one goal, and the Canadiens won the Stanley Cup not only in 1968, but also in 1969, also against the Blues, which also would end in a four-game sweep.

The noted star players from the 60's era were: Chicago's Bobby Hull, who set an NHL scoring record with 54 goals followed by 57; his record 51st goal came in 1966 against the Rangers; Boston's Bobby Orr, who would set NHL records for most assist by a defenseman, and who would win three Hart trophies; Montreal's Jean Beleveau, who won the first-ever Conn Smythe trophy as MVP in the Stanley Cup playoffs in 1965; and the Bruins' Phil Esposito, who would set NHL records for most goals and most points in a season.

Esposito, whose brother, Tony, played for the Blackhawks as a goaltender, was the first player in NHL history to have 100 points in a season. Both Esposito brothers are now in the Hockey Hall of

Fame.

The Bruins, in the 1969-70 season, won the Eastern Division title in the same year the Montreal Canadiens missed the playoffs. The New York Rangers, meanwhile, took fourth place away from Montreal when the Rangers defeated Detroit, 9-5, giving them 246 goals for the season and finishing with a record of 38-22-16. The Canadiens, meanwhile, were 38-21-16 before their season finale against Chicago, and had scored 242 goals. All Montreal needed to do was tie the Black Hawks, and they would make the playoffs, or score at least five goals no matter what.

Instead, they lost to Chicago, 10-2, and missed the playoffs for the first time since 1948. Thus, with Toronto finishing in last place, 1970 was the only year there was no Canadian team making the Stanley Cup playoffs.

Boston, which hadn't won a Stanley Cup since 1941, had no trouble finally claiming their first title since that time, against the St. Louis Blues. Bobby Orr's goal in the fourth game in sudden-death overtime had given Boston their Stanley Cup championship, and to this day, St. Louis hasn't been in the Stanley Cup finals since.

The following year, 1970-71, two more NHL teams were being added: the Buffalo Sabres, and the Vancouver Canucks. Many people had expected the Canucks to play in the Western Division, but the NHL, because there were no Canadian teams in the Stanley Cup playoffs the year before, purposely put Vancouver in the Eastern Division, where Buffalo also went. The Canucks would finally move out of the Eastern Division in 1974, and would make the playoffs in 1975.

Phil Esposito, during the 1970-71 season, scored an NHL record 76 goals and 152 points, and led Boston to another playoff appearance. But it was a team who didn't make the playoffs the previous year that would dominate the post-season, thanks to an untested goalie in Ken Dryden, who joined Montreal late in the season.